

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

UNIVERSAL LIFE CHURCH, INC, Plaintiff

-vs-

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, Defendant

Civil No. S-1954

In 1974, the United States government was sued by the Universal Life Church in response to the government's challenge to their right to have a tax-exempt status. When the judge ruled on this case, he also addressed the question of mail-order ordination, independent church charters, etc. While the Universal Life Church is not really a Christian ministry, nevertheless they performed a great service to all non-traditional ministries by fighting this case in court and eventually winning.

The following is excerpted from the court's decision in this case. The Universal Life Church is referred to as Plaintiff:

"...an Honorary Doctor of Divinity is a strictly religious title with no academic standing. Such titles may be issued by bona fide churches and religious denominations, such as plaintiff, as long as their issuance is limited to a course of instruction in the principles of the church or religious denomination... The statute is silent as to recognized honorary titles conferred for some meritorious recognition."

The court then addressed the issue of whether the ordination of ministers, granting of church charters, and the issuance of Honorary Doctor of Divinity certificates are substantial activities which do not further any religious purpose. The following is excerpted from the court's decision:

"Certainly the ordination of ministers and the chartering of churches are accepted activities of religious organizations... The fact that the plaintiff distributed ministers' credentials and Honorary Doctor of Divinity certificates is of no moment. Such activity may be analogized to mass conversions at a typical revival or religious crusade."

Now here is the real meat of the court's decision, and the part that guarantees the legality of your ordination:

"Neither this Court, nor any branch of this Government, will consider the merits or fallacies of a religion. Nor will the Court compare the beliefs, dogmas, and practices of a newly organized religion with those of an older, more established religion. Nor will the Court praise or condemn a religion, however excellent or fanatical or preposterous it may seem. WERE THE COURT TO DO SO, IT WOULD IMPINGE UPON THE GUARANTEES OF THE FIRST AMENDMENT."